

BASSAN'S SHORT GUIDE TO ROMANTICISM – The Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning – Fall 2009

1. "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains," said Rousseau. As with Voltaire and the French Encyclopedists of the Enlightenment, there is a double focus: on "Liberty" and on the manifold restrictions of civilized society which create "mind-forg'd manacles" (Blake)."
2. The Individual's human rights thus stand at the center of intellectual discourse among politicians and poets. Both Mary Wollstonecraft and Tom Paine wrote books on "The Rights of Man" in response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a key reactionary document. The ideal of universal brotherhood was celebrated by Schiller and Beethoven.
3. To paraphrase Richard II, poets now told "happy tales of the death of kings." Politically, the felt need to discard the mind-forg'd manacles in order to liberate the Self led to passionate embrace of the French Revolution among English writers, including Wollstonecraft and Blake. More extreme was the advocacy of so-called "philosophical anarchism" in William Godwin's seminal work, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*.
4. Cultural heroes for the Godwinians included Prometheus in his defiance of Zeus in Aeschylus' tragedy - the Plato of *The Symposium* --and John Milton, he of "the Devil's Party" in Parliament and in *Paradise Lost*. Ideals of political liberation also appeared in the contemporary music of Beethoven (*Fidelio*) and in Verdi's operas.
5. Radicals attacked not only monarchy but religious institutions, yet they celebrated individual worship to the point of Antinomianism (a direct unmediated infusion of divinity), like Anne Hutchinson earlier in Massachusetts. Anti-clericalism became deep-seated through the writings of Voltaire, d'Holbach, Godwin, Burns, Paine (*The Age of Reason*), and Shelley. Poets like Blake and Shelley created new mythologies pointing to utopias of secular brotherhood. Radicals like Robert Owen and Fourier dreamed of establishing viable socialistic communities (Pantisocracy, Brook Farm).
6. The diction of poets remained elevated but not artificial. Wordsworth led the way in creating "the language really used by men," and as a courtly audience lapsed, the focus (and sympathy) turned to the lower orders of society (both urban and rural) in Blake and Burns, especially. This reaches its apogee in Walt Whitman's poems.
7. Poets also became passionate about achieving a close relationship to "Nature," close enough to be called "Natural Supernaturalism": the rapturous fusion of the human being with the beautiful external world in, for example, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey."
8. New ideals emerged of the liberation of women from patriarchal rules. Iconoclasts like Wollstonecraft, Margaret Fuller, and later Emma Goldman, sought to end marriage and in

extreme examples establish “free choice.” Expanded education of women and children also became a crucial goal, on the model of Rousseau’s *Emile*.

9. The new poetry created new wine in bottles both old and new. Heroic couplets, sonnets, terza rima, and Spenserian stanzas remained, alongside Hymns, Odes, and verse dramas like those of Shelley and Byron. The Poet now became the center of the poetic enterprise as with a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” he articulated the visionary ideals of the human race. Wordsworth’s *Prelude* is about the “Growth of the Poet’s Soul.”

10. Inevitably the poets also incorporated the skepticism as well as the idealism of the age. Goethe’s *Faust* is a touchstone here. Dark currents appear in Gothic fiction, an acknowledgment of the irrational, violent, and sexually aggressive motives of otherwise admirable scientists, philosophers, and priests.

11. Archetypal Romantic characters included the Solitary Exile (Wandering Jew, Ancient Mariner, “The Creature,” Childe Harold, Cain, Heathcliff, Captain Ahab, Ethan Brand) -- the Fatal Woman (Coleridge, Keats, Hawthorne) -- the Child (Wordsworth, Blake) – and the Vampire (Polidori, Stoker). See also #12.

12. The image of “The Poet” develops many strands including the Bard-Prophet (Blake, Shelley, Whitman) – the demonic or mad Poet (Coleridge, Poe, Clare, Very) - the Poet of Love and Death (Keats, Poe, Dickinson) –The Quester for the Sublime (Byron).

13. The theme of the Double represents a Manichean/Freudian portrait of the Self, divided between the superego’s virtuous intellectual activity (scientific, etc.) and the id’s demonic, lustful cruelty: Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – Poe’s characters - Stevenson’s Jekyll/Hyde.

William Blake	Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Marriage of Heaven and Hell.
William Wordsworth	Tintern Abbey. Ode: Intimations of Immortality. The Prelude.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge	Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Kubla Kahn. Christabel.
George Gordon, Lord Byron	Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage. Manfred. Don Juan.
Percy Bysshe Shelley	Hymn to Intellectual Beauty. Mont Blanc. Adonais. Prometheus Unbound.
John Keats	Ode on a Grecian Urn. Ode to a Nightingale. Ode on Melancholy.